

# **Community-based conservation of red-bellied monkeys and wetland ecosystems on Agonve island, Benin**

## **1<sup>st</sup> Quarter Report**

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16<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Application ID: 46571-1

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## **Abstract**

This quarter's activities under the "*Community-Based Conservation of Red-Bellied Monkeys and Wetland Ecosystems on Agonvè Island, Benin*" project reflect a strong, participatory approach to conserving an endangered species and its habitat. The main initiatives implemented during this period included a stakeholders' meeting, a camera trap survey, and a participatory workshop with the local community.

The meeting with key stakeholders raised awareness about the ecological role of the red-bellied monkey (*Cercopithecus erythrogaster*), the main pressures threatening its survival, and the potential benefits of conserving it – not only for the health of the ecosystem but also for future income opportunities through tourism. The first camera trap survey documented a rich mammalian diversity within the swamp forests of Agonvè, although the red-bellied monkey remained elusive in this first trial. Nonetheless, species such as the sitatunga, mona monkey, harnessed bushbuck, and genet were captured, emphasizing the ecological significance of this ecosystem.

The participatory workshop provided an opportunity to raise awareness at the community level, addressing misconceptions about the red-bellied monkey's abundance and role in the ecosystem. The workshop also facilitated constructive dialogue about human-wildlife conflict, proposing non-violent mitigation methods and securing strong community engagement in future conservation actions. Importantly, knowledge about the red-bellied monkey and wetland conservation improved dramatically after the workshop, reflecting a newfound understanding of the species' endangered status and the need for protective measures.

## **I- Meeting with local authorities**

On Monday, May 5, 2025, a meeting was held in the Kpedekpo arrondissement as part of the project titled *"Community-Based Conservation of Red-Bellied Monkeys and Wetland Ecosystems on Agonvè Island, Benin."* The team met with seven key local stakeholders, including the District Manager of Kpedekpo, 3 chiefs of the villages of Wometo, Agonvè, and Agonkpodji, and 3 young community leaders from these villages. The main objective of this meeting was to present the conservation project of the red-bellied monkey (*Cercopithecus erythrogaster*) to the local authorities and gather their recommendations and concerns. It was a participatory approach designed to align the project with the realities, knowledge, needs, and constraints of the riparian communities.

### **1. Project presentation and ecological background**

We opened the meeting by outlining the environmental context of Agonvè Island over the past 15-20 years. We explained how the habitats have been progressively degraded, forests have diminished, and the pressure on natural habitats has intensified. Using the red-bellied monkey – a species endemic to Benin and Nigeria and classified as "endangered" – as a key example, we explained the ecological role of this primate. The red-bellied monkey plays a crucial role in forest regeneration by consuming fruit and dispersing seeds across the forest, thereby helping to maintain ecosystem health. This role is especially important on a fragile island ecosystem such as Agonvè.

We also explained how conserving this endemic species could become a basis for developing sustainable tourism initiatives on the island. Viewing monkeys in their natural habitat could become an alternative income stream for the community if properly managed. We summed up the project's mission in these words: "To present our mission on Agonvè in two words, it's Agonvè Révélé"—an approach that aims to highlight the territory's rich natural heritage through conserving its wildlife.



*Photo 1: Presentation of the project to the local authorities by Stanislas Mahussi Gandaho, © Myriame Salanon*

## **2. Communication tools and inclusive approach**

To guarantee equal access to information for all members of the community, a strategy of inclusive communication was implemented. To this end, bilingual leaflets (in French and Fon) were distributed to participants. These illustrated brochures provided key information about the red-bellied monkey – its physical characteristics, habitat, the main threats it faces, the benefits of conserving it, and protective measures to be adopted. This initiative was warmly welcomed by participants, who recognized it as a sign of respect for their culture and a genuine effort to collaborate with them in conserving their resources. To broaden awareness, packages of brochures were handed to the chiefs of villages, who were encouraged to distribute them to other members of their communities. The villagers were also encouraged to pass on this information and to motivate their peers to take an active part in the interactive workshop to be held in the coming days. The aim of this approach is to foster large-scale community engagement and greater ownership of the project at the local level.



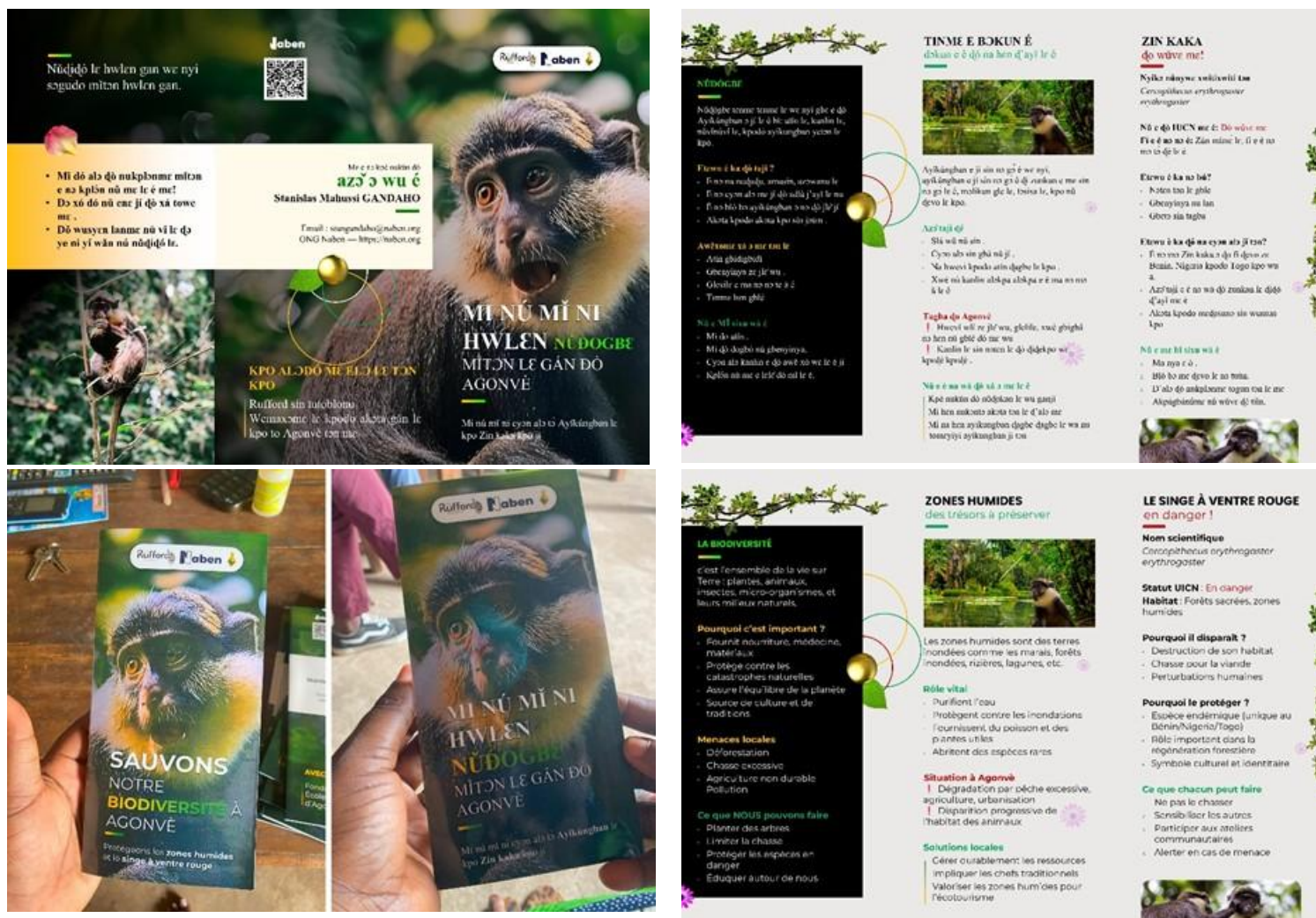


Photo 2: Sample of brochure pages in French and Fon language

### 3. Concerns raised by the community

The exchanges revealed several key concerns from community representatives. The main issue raised was the ongoing conflict between farmers and certain primate species, particularly during the agricultural season. Monkeys frequently venture into fields in search of food, causing significant damage to agricultural production and threatening the livelihoods of the villagers. A key question was raised about protective measures that could be initiated to help communities avoid such intrusions without causing harm to wildlife. We reiterated firmly that, although the main objective of the project is the conservation of the red-bellied monkey and other endangered species, agricultural realities must be considered. Nevertheless, violence against or killing these primates is prohibited. To respond to these concerns, several non-violent and dissuasive measures were discussed:

- *Installing protective nets:* fine mesh nets can act as physical barriers to keep monkeys away from agricultural fields without causing harm.
- *Using acoustic devices:* metal cans or other noisy items can produce sounds when monkeys approach, thereby deterring them.
- *Setting up animated scarecrows:* human-shaped figures with movement mechanisms can create the illusion of human presence and keep monkeys away.



*Photo 3: Discussion with local community representatives to address human-wildlife conflict, discussing sustainable solutions—from protective nets to habitat restoration—that safeguard both livelihoods and endangered primate species. © Myriame Salanon*

Furthermore, another key question was raised: What will happen if, after the wildlife survey, the red-bellied monkeys are absent from the targeted area? Will a translocation be implemented?

We assured the assembly that the main objective of the project would remain the same in such a scenario. If the species were gone from the area, the effort would focus on

habitat restoration to enable eventual natural return or to protect other priority species present. Translocation might be considered in the long term if ecological and technical conditions are allowed. Finally, we explained that these proposals were only a starting point. The interactive workshop, scheduled for the following days, will provide a space for the community to dialogue and propose their own solutions. Suggestions made during the workshop will be carefully analyzed to identify the most appropriate and realistic measures to implement in the field.

#### **4. Local commitment and perspectives**

The District Manager took the floor to thank the Naben team for their ongoing engagement in conserving the island's natural resources. He insisted on the need to protect the camera traps that the project plans to install by choosing their locations carefully. He also encouraged the project team to reflect on the sustainability of their actions, particularly by developing a logical and durable follow-up to the current activities. Other stakeholders expressed their enthusiasm and willingness to actively contribute to future phases of the project, especially during the interactive workshop.

#### **5. Next step – interactive workshop**

The meeting closed with a proposal to organize an interactive workshop soon. During this workshop, the community will be invited to propose and discuss realistic, tailored solutions to conserving the red-bellied monkeys and their habitats. To guarantee strong participation and a consensus view, the date of this workshop was decided in collaboration with the villagers and their leaders.



## II- 1st Wildlife inventory month with camera traps

On May 10, 2025, a team composed of Stanislas Mahussi Gandaho, Habib Agossou, Homamed Ayaka, and two members of the local community, deployed 15 camera traps in the swamp forest of Agonvè Island. The main objective of this mission was to inventory the wildlife species present in the area, with a particular focus on endangered or vulnerable species, such as the red-bellied monkey. There were no previous studies that had documented the rich wildlife diversity of this ecosystem. The cameras were installed within a radius of 264 meters. The close spacing of the stations on this site is explained by the limited accessibility during this wet season.



Photo 4: Setting up and deploying camera traps. © Mohamed Ayaka

One month after deployment, on June 10, 2025, the cameras were retrieved. The recordings captured by these cameras revealed the presence of four species.

- *Sitatunga (Tragelaphus spekii)*: The sitatunga is one of the largest antelope species in Benin. It is classified as LC (Least Concern) on the IUCN Red List and EN (Endangered) on Benin's Red List (Neuenschwander, Sinsin, & Goergen, 2011)
- *Mona Monkey (Cercopithecus mona)*: This species is currently classified as Near Threatened (NT) on the IUCN Red List due to anthropogenic pressures such as habitat degradation, hunting, and poaching (Matsuda Goodwin, R., Segniagbeto, G., Nobimè, G. & Imong, 2019)
- *Harnessed Bushbuck (Tragelaphus scriptus)*: The IUCN conservation status for this species is LC (Least Concern), while it is classified as NT (Near Threatened) on Benin's Red List (Nago et al., 2024)

- *Genet* (*Genetta sp*): The genet is classified as LC (Least Concern) on both the IUCN and Benin's Red List (INRAB, 2021).

Common name	Scientific name	IUCN Red List Status	Benin Red List Status
Sitatunga	<i>Tragelaphus spekii</i>	LC	EN
Mona Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus mona</i>	NT	NT
Harnessed Bushbuck	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>	LC	NT
Genet	<i>Genetta sp</i>	LC	LC

Below are some images of the species captured by camera traps. A video compilation of Sitatunga is also available [here](#).



*Sitatunga*



*Mona*



*Harnessed Bushbuck*



*Genet*

Photo 5: Sample of camera trap image captured Agonve Island, from 10 Mai - 10 June 2025. © Stanislas Mahussi Gandaho

The results underscore the rich wildlife diversity of Agonvè Island. The presence of species such as the sitatunga, classified as endangered (EN) on Benin's Red List, highlights the importance of conserving this ecosystem. The harnessed bushbuck and mona, although less endangered, are also species of conservation interest



### III- Workshop of conservation of the Red-bellied monkey

On June 11, 2025, a participatory workshop was held in Kpédékpo, in the commune of Zagnanado. The workshop, successfully led by our team, addressed numerous questions and misconceptions within the local community.

#### 1. Pre-workshop evaluation

To assess the community's knowledge of the red-bellied monkey in Agonvè, we started by asking a series of multiple-choice questions. These questions addressed the community's perception of the species' importance, its habitat, its distribution in Africa, and the threats it faces. The same questions were asked again at the end of the workshop, allowing us to observe a clear improvement in participants' knowledge.

To make sure the community was well acquainted with their surroundings, we presented four images of different species of monkeys and asked participants to identify which ones they frequently encounter. 67% (39 out of 58) identified the first species, the green colobus (*Procolobus verus*), and 79% (46 out of 58) recognized the red-bellied monkey (*Cercopithecus erythrogaster*) in Agonvè and its surroundings. They explained that this species is not found in the core swamp forest but rather at its periphery and often enters agricultural fields nearby. They also mentioned the presence of the mona monkey, a species frequently found in wet areas, in contrast to the first two species, which avoid strongly inundated zones.



*Photo 6: Presentation of a few species of monkey and participants expressing their perceptions of the species they see. Right photo © Lovesse Myagis*

#### 2. Why should we protect it?

To help the community appreciate the importance of protecting the red-bellied monkey, we explained its numerous benefits. These benefits include tourism

development, the maintenance of cultural practices, the ecological role of the species in seed dispersal, and its ability to attract other wildlife species. The community was also informed about the main threats affecting this species, such as hunting and agricultural expansion, which result in the destruction of its habitat. Participants raised the issue of damage to agricultural fields by these monkeys; nearby farmers can lose between half and nearly a quarter of a hectare of maize in a single day. This problem was previously raised during the first meeting with the villagers' leaders and youth representatives. It is crucial to find solutions to ease human-wildlife conflict.



*Photo 7: Presentation of the benefits of the Red-Bellied Monkey. © Lovesse Myagis*

Some solutions were suggested and will be implemented once we, together with Naben, have confirmation of this species' actual presence in the area. According to the first-month inventory results, this species has not yet been captured by camera traps, although the mona monkey is frequently present. Nevertheless, participants remain convinced that conserving this species brings more benefits than drawbacks. As a participant put it **«we won't chase after the little on the back of the hand and throw away what's in the palm»**, i.e. «a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush». This view encouraged us to pursue the necessary actions to protect the rich diversity of Agonvè and this valuable wetland.

Some of the actions we are considering include the restoration of vegetation through tree planting, as previously implemented in a project by Naben with funding from Play for Nature. We also stressed the need to prohibit hunting – a practice that has already diminished in the area, according to community reports – and to educate children, whether at home or at school. The latter will be a key part of future initiatives, and we plan to return to the area for a workshop with school children. The workshop concluded with the same questions we asked at the outset, to measure the change in knowledge about conserving the red-bellied monkey and protecting the Agonvè wetland.



### 3. Excitement during participation

The workshop was marked by enthusiastic participation from community members, who were encouraged to voice their perspectives. To keep their attention and motivation, we asked insightful questions and rewarded correct answers with tangelo orange seedlings. This approach not only kept the participants engaged but also provided them with a tangible symbol of the practices we were promoting, helping to guarantee the sustainability of the workshop's outcomes.



*Photo 8: Offer of a tangelo orange plant to encourage participants to speak out, express their views and become part of the red-bellied monkey conservation project.*

### 4. In-place impact of the workshop

The results show a remarkable improvement in understanding the issues related to conserving the red-bellied monkey. For example, before the workshop, 89% of participants believed the red-bellied monkey was a non-threatened, abundant species, but afterwards, only 1% maintained this view. Furthermore, none of the participants believed the species was endangered before the workshop; afterwards, 100% recognized its precarious situation.

Awareness of the wetland's importance also improved. Before the workshop, 97% of participants recognized the area as a key wildlife habitat; afterwards, this figure rose to 100%. Furthermore, understanding that the wetland supports both fisheries and agriculture jumped from 88% to 100%. There was a unanimous recognition of the economic and ecological benefits provided by this ecosystem.

The workshop also raised awareness about the main threatening activities affecting the red-bellied monkey's habitat. Before the workshop, only 18% of participants identified

unsustainable agriculture and uncontrolled hunting as threatening factors; afterwards, 98% recognized agricultural expansion as a danger, and 100% recognized hunting. This increased awareness is crucial for implementing effective conservation measures.

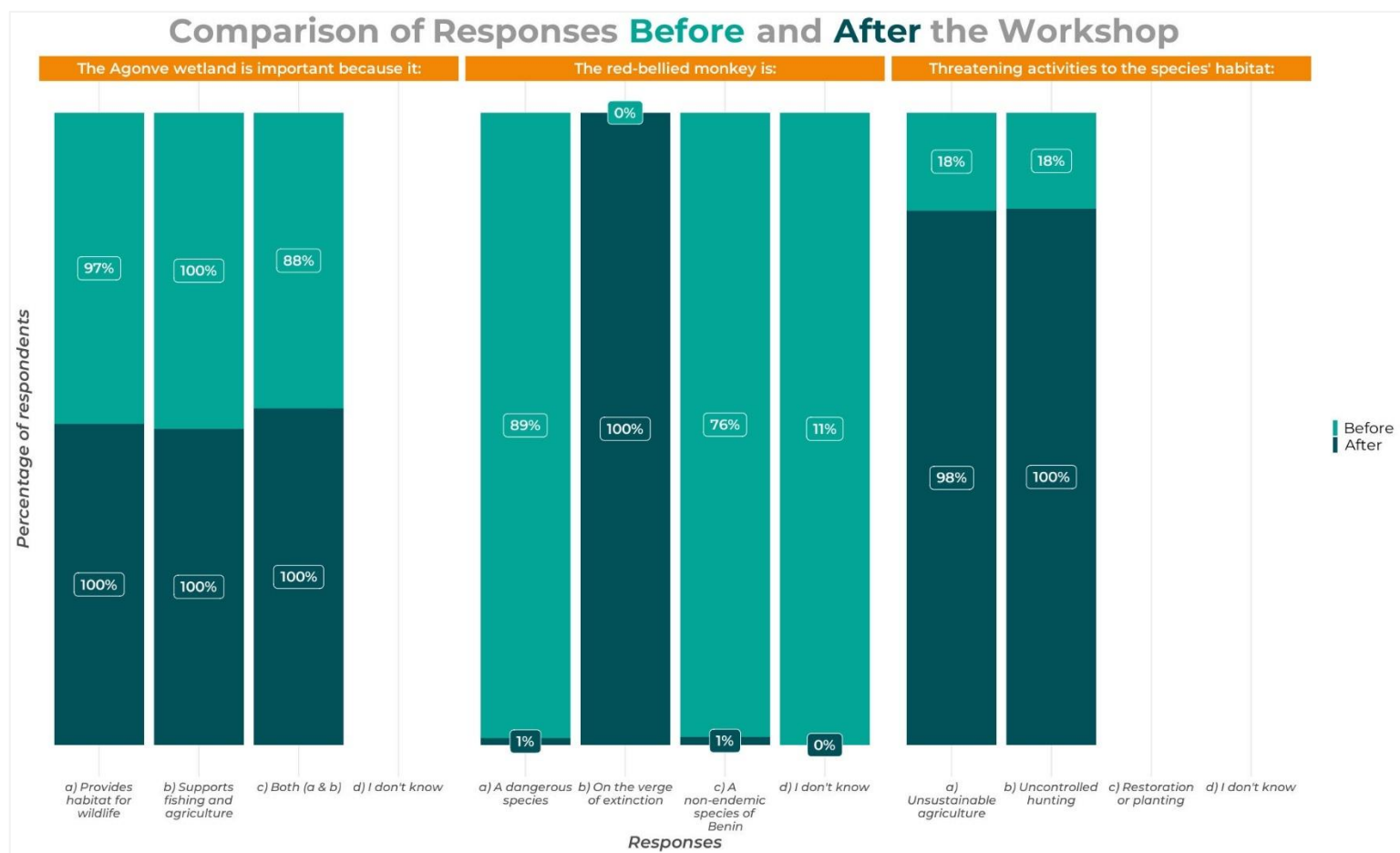


Figure 1: Comparison of evaluation results before and after workshop

## Acknowledgement

We express our deep and sincere gratitude to the Rufford Foundation for its generous financial support for this project. Without their funding, this community-centric approach to conserving the red-bellied monkey and its wetland ecosystem on Agonvè would not have been possible. We appreciate the continued collaboration of the Naben team, the local authorities, the community members, and all stakeholders who made this project a success. The Foundation's support has empowered us to pursue conserving a key species while strengthening the engagement of communities in protecting their own natural heritage

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